

# analysis

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Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. — RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

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## If We Quit Voting

NEW YORK in mid-summer is measurably more miserable than any other place in this world, and should be comparable to the world for which all planners are headed. Why New Yorkers, otherwise sane, should choose to parboil their innards in a political campaign during this time of the year is a question that comes under the head of man's inscrutable propensity for self-punishment. And if a fellow elects to let the whole thing pass him by, some socially conscious energumen is bound to sweat him with a lecture on civic duty; like the citizeness who came at me.

For twenty-five years my dereliction has been known to my friends and more than one has undertaken to set me straight; out of these arguments came a solid defense for my non-voting position. So that the lady in question was well-parried with practiced retorts. I pointed out, with many instances, that though we have had candidates and platforms and parties and campaigns in abundance, we have had an equivalent plentitude of poverty and crime and war. The regularity with which the perennial promise of "good times" wound up in depression suggested the incompetence of politics in economic affairs. Maybe the good society we have been voting for lay some other way; why not try another fork in the road, the one pointing to individual self-improvement, particularly in acquiring a knowledge of economics? And so on.

There was one question put to me by my charming annoyer which I deftly sidestepped, for the day was sultry and the answer called for some mental effort. The question: "What would happen if we quit voting?"

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IF you are curious about the result of non-eating you come upon the question of why we eat. So, the query put to me by the lady brings up the reason for voting. The theory of government by elected representatives is that these fellows are hired by the voting citizenry to take care of all matters relating to their common interests. However, it is different from ordinary employment in that the representative is not under specific orders, but is given blanket authority to do what he considers desirable for the public welfare in any and all circumstances, subject to constitutional limitations. In all matters relating to public affairs the will of the individual is transferred to the elected agent, whose responsibility is commensurate with the power thus invested in him.

It is this transference of power from voter to elected agents which is the crux of republicanism. The transference is well-nigh absolute. Even the constitutional limitations are not so in fact since they can be circumvented by legal devices in the hands of the agents. Except for the tenuous process of impeachment the man-

date is irrevocable. For the abuse or misuse of the mandate the only recourse left to the principals, the people, is to oust the agents at the next election. But, when we oust the "rascals" do we not, as a matter of course, invite a new crowd? It all adds up to the fact that by voting themselves out of power the people put the running of their community life in the hands of a separate group, upon whose wisdom and integrity the fate of the community rests.

All this would change if we quit voting. Such abstinence would be tantamount to this notice to politicians: since we as individuals have decided to look after our affairs, your services are no longer needed. Having assumed social power we must, as individuals, assume social responsibility; provided, of course, the politicians accept their discharge. The job of running the community would fall on each and all of us. We might hire an expert to tell us about the most improved fire-fighting apparatus, or a manager to look after cleaning the streets, or an engineer to build us a bridge; but the final decision, particularly in the matter of raising funds to defray costs, would rest with the town-hall meeting. The hired specialists would have no authority other than that necessary for the performance of their contractual duties; coercive power, which is the essence of political authority, would be exercised, when and if necessary, only by the committee of the whole.

There is some warrant for the belief that a better social order would ensue when the individual is responsible for it and, therefore, responsive to its needs. He no longer has the law or the law-makers to cover his sins of omission; need of the neighbors' good opinion will be sufficient compulsion for jury duty and no loopholes in a draft law, no recourse to "political pull," will be possible when danger to his community calls him to arms. In his private affairs, the now sovereign individual will have to meet the dictum of the market place: produce or you do not eat; no law will help you. In his public behavior he must be decent or suffer the sentence of social ostracism, with no recourse to legal exoneration. From a law-abiding citizen he will be transmuted into a self-respecting man.

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WOULD chaos result? No, there would be order, without law to disturb it. But, let us define chaos. Is it not disharmony resulting from social friction? When we trace social friction to its source do we not find that it seminates in a feeling of unwarranted hurt, or injustice? Therefore, chaos is a social condition in which injustice obtains. Now, when one man may take, by law, what another man has put his labor into, we have injustice of the keenest kind, for the denial of a man's right to possess and enjoy what he produces is akin to a denial of life. Yet the power to confiscate property is the

first business of politics. We see how this is so in the matter of taxation; but greater by far is the amount of property confiscated by monopolies, all of which are founded in law.

While this economic basis of injustice has been lost in our adjustment to it, the resulting friction is quite evident. Most of us are poor in spite of our constant effort and known ability to produce an abundance; the incongruity is aggravated by a feeling of hopelessness. But the keenest hurt arises from the thought that the wealth we see about us is somehow ours by right of labor, but is not ours by right of law. Resentment, intensified by bewilderment, stirs up a reckless urge to do something about it. We demand justice; we have friction. We have strikes and crimes and bankruptcy and mental unbalances. And we cheat our neighbors, and each seeks for himself a legal privilege to live by another's labor. And we have war. Is this a condition of harmony or of chaos?

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In the frontier days of our country there was little law, but much order; for the affairs of the community were in the hands of the citizenry. Although fiction may give an opposite impression, it is a fact that there was less per capita crime to take care of then than there is now when law pervades every turn and minute of our lives. What gave the West its wild and woolly reputation was the glamorous drama of intense community life. Everybody was keenly interested in the hanging of a cattle rustler; it was not done in the calculated quiet of a prison, with the dispatch of a mechanical system. The rail-riding of a violator of town-hall dicta had to be the business of the town prosecutor, who was everybody. Though the citizen's private musket was seldom used for the protection of life and property, its presence promised swift and positive justice, from which no legal chicanery offered escape, and its loud report announced the dignity of decency. Every crime was committed against the public, not the law, and therefore the public made an ado about it. Mistakes were made, to be sure, for human judgment is ever fallible; but, until the politician came, there was no deliberate malfeasance or misfeasance; until laws came there were no violations, and the code of human decency made for order.

So, if we should quit voting for parties and candidates, we would individually reassume responsibility for our acts and, therefore, responsibility for the common good. There would be no way of dodging the verdict of the marketplace; we would take back only in proportion to our contribution. Any attempt to profit at the expense of a neighbor or the community would be quickly spotted and as quickly squelched, for everybody would recognize a threat to himself in the slightest indul-

gence of injustice. Since nobody would have the power to enforce monopoly conditions none would obtain. Order would be maintained by the rules of existence, the natural laws of economics.

THAT is, if the politicians would permit themselves to be thus ousted from their positions of power and privilege. I doubt it. Remember that the proposal to quit voting is basically revolutionary; it amounts to a shifting of power from one group to another, which is the essence of revolution. As soon as the non-voting movement got up steam the politicians would most surely start a counter-revolution. Measures to enforce voting would be instituted; fines would be imposed for violations, and prison sentences would be meted out to repeaters. It is a necessity for political power, no matter how gained, to have the moral support of public approval, and suffrage is the most efficient scheme for registering it; notice how Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin insisted on having ballots cast. In any republican government, even ours, only a fraction of the populace vote for the successful candidate, but that fraction is quantitatively impressive; it is this appearance of overwhelming sanction which supports him in the exercise of political power. Without it he would be lost.

Propaganda, too, would bombard this passive resistance to Statism; not only that put out by the politicians of all parties—the coalition would be as complete as it would be spontaneous—but also the more effective kind emanating from seemingly disinterested sources. All the monopolists, all the coupon-clipping foundations, all the tax-exempt eleemosynary institutions, in short, all the "respectables"—would join in a howling defense of the status quo. We would be told most emphatically that unless we keep on voting away our power to responsible persons, it would be grabbed by irresponsible ones; tyranny would result. That is probably true, seeing how since the beginning of time men have sought to acquire property without laboring for it. The answer lies, as it always has, in the judicious use of private artillery. On this point a story, apocryphal no doubt, is worth telling: When Napoleon's conquerors were considering what to do with him, a back-slashed American allowed that a fellow of such parts might be handy in this new country and ought to be invited to come over. As for the possibility of a Napoleonic regime being started in America, the recent revolutionists dismissed it with the remark that the monarch with which he shot robots could also kill tyrants. There is no substitute for human dignity.

But the argument is rather specious in the light of the fact that every election is a seizure of power. The balloting system has been defined as a battle between opposing forces, each armed with proposals for the public good, for a grant of power, to put these proposals into practice. As far as it goes, this definition is correct; but when the successful contestants acquire the grant of power toward what end does he use it? Not theoretically but practically. Does he not, with an eye to the next campaign, and with the citizens' money, go in for purchasing support from pressure-groups? Whether it is by catering to a monopoly interest whose campaign contribution is necessary to his purpose, or to a privileged labor group, or to a hungry army of unemployed or veterans, the over-the-earthen method of seizing and maintaining political power is standard practice.

THIS is not, however, an indictment of our election system. It is rather a description of our adven-

ture to conquest. Going back to beginnings—although the process is still in vogue, as in Manchuria, or more recently in the Baltic states—when a band of freebooters developed an appetite for other people's property they went after it with vim and vigor. Repeated visitations of this nature left the victims breathless, if not lifeless, and propertied to boot. So, as men do when they have no other choice, they made a compromise. They hired one gang of thieves to protect them from other gangs, and in time the price paid for such protection came to be known as taxation. The tax-gatherers settled down in the conquered communities, possibly to make collections certain and regular, and as the years rolled on a blend of cultures and of bloods made of the two classes one nation. But the system of taxation remained after it had lost its original significance; lawyers and professors of economics, by devious circumlocution, turned tribute into "fiscal policy" and clothed it with social good. Nevertheless, the social effect of the system was to keep the citizenry divided into two economic groups: payers and receivers. Those who lived without producing became traditionalized as "servants of the people," and thus gained ideological support. They further entrenched themselves by acquiring sub-tax-collecting allies; that is, some of their group became landowners, whose collection of rent rested on the law-enforcement powers of the ruling clique, and others were granted subsidies, tariffs, franchises, patent rights, monopoly privileges of one sort or another. This division of spoils between those who wield power and those whose privileges depend on it is succinctly described in the expression, "The State within the State."

Thus when we trace our political system to its origin we come to conquest. Tradition, law and custom have obscured its true nature, but no metamorphosis has taken place; its claws and fangs are still sharp, its appetite as voracious as ever. In the light of history it is not a figure

of speech to define politics as the art of seizing power; and its present purpose, as of old, is economic. There is no doubt that men of high purpose will always give of their talents for the common welfare, with no thought of recompense other than the good will of the community. But, so long as our taxation system remains, so long as the political means for acquiring economic goods is available, just so long will the spirit of conquest assert itself; for men always seek to satisfy their desires with the least effort. It is interesting to speculate on the kind of campaign and the type of candidates we would have if taxation were abolished and if, also, the power to dispense privilege vanished. Who would run for office if there were "nothing in it?"

WHY should a self-respecting citizen endorse an institution grounded in thievery? For that is what one does when one votes. If it be argued that we must let bygones be bygones, see what we can do toward cleaning up the institution so that it can be used for the maintenance of an orderly existence, the answer is that it cannot be done; we have been voting for one "good government" after another, and what have we got? Perhaps the silliest argument, and yet the one invariably advanced when this succession of failures is pointed out, is that "we must choose the lesser of two evils." Under what compulsion are we to make such a choice? Why not pass up both of them?

To effectuate the suggested revolution all that is necessary is to stay away from the polls. Unlike other revolutions, it calls for no organization, no violence, no war-fund, no leader to sell it out. In the quiet of his conscience each citizen pledges himself, to himself, not to give moral support to an immoral institution, and on election day he remains at home. That's all. I started my revolution twenty-five years ago and the country is none the worse for it.

## YOUR REVIEWER OF BOOKS

ALBERT JAY NOCK begins in this issue a series of book reviews.

An experience of my college days put me on my guard with book reviews, so that when I read one now I do not let it decide my choice of reading. One of my instructors did reviewing as a side line. In a corner of his room, reaching half way to the ceiling, was a stack of books awaiting, as I supposed, his critical analysis. When he told me how much time he had for the job I asked him how in the name of Jehovah could he possibly do it. He then explained that reviewing did not involve reading; a hurried glance through a few pages gave him an idea of the author's style, a more leisurely look at the opening and closing chapters, also the table of contents, suggested the drift of the story or argument, and he was ready to take pen in hand.

If you have ever read a review after having read the book you will agree that the technique of my college instructor is still standard practice. Why should it be otherwise? At the rates paid for run-of-the-mill reviewing one would starve, even at pre-OPA food prices, if one put in the reading time necessary for a worthwhile evaluation. The quotable phrases which constitute the average review are enough for the money; and the purpose of inducing the publisher to buy advertising space has been served.

Since Mr. Nock, like the rest of the editorial staff of *analysis*, maintains his amateur standing, and therefore writes what he jolly well pleases, and at his own good time, the conditions which make for commercial reviewing do not apply here. Which remark, I must admit on reflection, is entirely gratuitous and unnecessary. You will understand why this is so if you are familiar with his *Our Enemy the State*, or his *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, or, indeed, with any of his books or magazine articles. Mr. Nock always writes "for himself." Therefore, he is always worth reading.

The critical standards which Mr. Nock brings to bear on anything he writes are distilled from a lifetime study of "the best that has been thought and said." Added is an innate nobility of mind and a gentleness of spirit, which this current act of friendship illustrates.

## Who is Worth it?

WITH dispassionate exactitude, like the listing of a bankruptcy liabilities, comes now the cost in qualities for one-half of the war which it now appears, was fought to make the world safe for Communism. A quarter of a million boys are forever; another million are more or less twisted out of shape. On the set side of the ledger somebody has entered "a way of life." It was to preserve that precious thing, we are told, that the stated price was paid.

A "way of life" is for the living only. I am one of the living. Then, when all comes to all, the other for that outlay of life and limb is a pattern of existence which it gives to me to enjoy for the rest of my days. When I reflect on how I may balance the account, I must admit that I cannot do it; I am not worth the price, by a long shot.

Nor do I know of any person now living—not the voiceless Frank Hague nor the voiceless Frank LaFave, nor the shrewdest bank president nor the most befuddled professor of "institutional" economics—who might measure up to the cost of preserving it. Even if the future should yield us a Shakespeare or a Galileo, and we could positively attribute that good fortune to the present "way," the price would still be excessive.

For what the dead and the half-dead might have done for society and themselves during the normal expectancy of forty years is beyond the reckoning of any sage rule. The loss is positive, the gain largely conjectural.

Furthermore, any American who sets himself up as worthy of the price paid for with a quarter of a million lives is disqualified by the very thought. Only a loon could be so brazen.

It appears, then, that the entry in the asset side is fictitious.

## "What to do with the Germans?"

This pamphlet has attracted some attention. The first five thousand have been distributed and a cut has been made into the second printing. George L. Rusby, of New Jersey, has mailed copies to every member of Congress. Jerome Joachim, of Illinois, got the members of his Kiwanis Club to debate the proposition of collecting the economic rent of Germany as a means of paying off our war debt, using the pamphlet as "source material." Walter Pollock of Philadelphia, has in mind the preparation of a Congressional Bill in which the proposition will be included, and hopes to have it introduced; in fact, several readers are urging that such a bill be promoted. Orders for bundle copies are redounding to the benefit of our subscription list. Purchasers advise: "it starts up argument." Single copy, 50¢; 25 for \$1.00; 100 for \$2.00.

## Society of Individualists (?)

To subscribers in the New York area, and their friends, *analysis* offers a personal service, beginning this Fall: class room study of standard and current works on individualism, lectures and group discussions of events and trends. Additional space for this purpose has been acquired; a program will be announced in the August issue. Meanwhile, inquiries will be welcome.

## E. L. Harper Joins Up

The excellent likeness of Thomas Jefferson by Mildred Baldwin in the June issue will be followed by further pictorial contributions from that gifted lady. In this issue appears the first cartoon by the well-known magazine artist, E. L. Harper. He is a *freewillinger* who found the call of individualism irresistible.

July 1945

## The Murray

(The spate of "social legislation" pouring into the Washington hopper just about covers the do-gooder gamut: from guaranteeing to every citizen relief from tooth-ache to providing him, willy-nilly, with a life-time income. It is Beveridge come to town. Coming right on the heels of the German conquest this legislation looms up now as the proceeds of the war. It should be the signal for a far more important struggle that between the individual and the State. In the interests of such a conflict, an examination of these socio-political proposals is in order. The most futile of these is the one promising "full employment"; it is therefore proper to begin this series of economic analyses with a look into this promise.)

TO a retailer the words "purchasing power" carry a message comparable to "I love you." Only too well does he know how his hopes and his plans, his dreams and his aspirations rest upon the power of the consumer to magnetize the stock off his shelves, over the counter and out of the store.

Therefore, when he reads "guaranteed purchasing power" on the label of the Murray-Dingell bills, also propagandized as the "sixty million job" bills, he is for taking the potion in large doses, and bother the ingredients. Maybe the President of the American Retail Federation, representing many thousands of the country's merchants, never read the proposal. Maybe he does not in fact speak for every member and subscriber of his organization. Nevertheless, the promise of an ever-normal purchasing power was too alluring to resist. So, he takes pen in hand and writes Congress to hurry along a good quantity of this glorious concoction.

Others likewise send endorsements. Nobody, except, perhaps, the scriveners who draft it, ever read a Congressional bill in its entirety, and only a few crackpot outsiders apply critical standards. It is not necessary, anyhow, when a bill is first introduced. In the present case, it is agreed, amendments and revisions will water down the proposal to a 1948 campaign issue. By that time, the expected clouds of depression will be visible, and the protective coverage the bill is supposed to furnish will provide for ample oratory. For the nonce, the preamble, setting forth its noble purposes, is sufficient unto the passage thereof. If this preamble draws letters of commendation from gullible presidents of organizations, why bother about the text? The moral support so desperately desired by the shapers of our destiny has been gained.

Taking the promise on the label at its word, the retailer, along with the rest of the citizenry, might ask himself three questions before putting the bottle to his lips. One, what is purchasing power? Two, is it something government can guarantee? Three, in the light of reason and historical experiments along this line, what is the probable price of this attempt to generate purchasing power by uskase?

It may go hard to tell the average retailer, to whom the ringing cash register is the symphony of life, that money is not the generator of sales. It is only the wire that carries the current, but the current itself starts deep down in the human desire to live. Before we inquire how this desire to live stirs up purchasing, and just to clear the atmosphere of a gross misconception, we might point out that during their inflation of the 1920's the Germans had lots of money and they starved. On the other hand,